

AUGMENTING ARCHITECTURE: SHANNON NOVAK'S CRYPTOCOSMOS

Artist Shannon Novak is a synaesthete. He has a unique ability to see colour in music, or hear music in geometric shapes, among other sensory shifts. This charged associative experience precedes and guides his work. Speaking about his process to Radio New Zealand's Justin Gregory, he describes how objects, shapes and sound can become related:

I look at an object and there's a definite set of shapes I relate to that object, and with those shapes a definite sound. For example, I might look at a skyline and I might hear the buildings as a series of separate drum beats in a specific pattern. So I'm seeing shape and converting that into sound. So it's putting that [experience] down on paper and then making it a reality through animation.¹

Novak has created a number of site-specific pieces inside and outside galleries and museums that activate the sites and transform viewers' experiences. His works manifest in a range of materials but share a stylised sonic and visual language. The sounds are predominantly sparse monophonic piano or chord-based compositions, referencing the Western tradition of 'classical' music. The visual components are primarily hard-edged dynamic lines and angular forms in vivid monochrome colours, evoking Modernist abstraction.

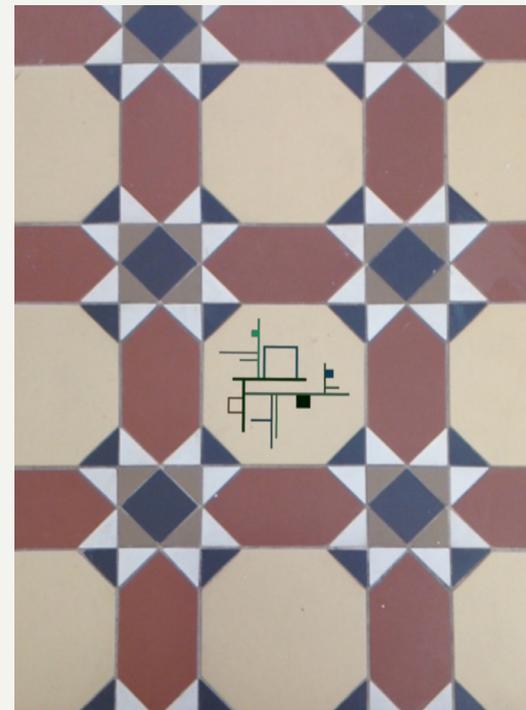
Novak's recent work utilises 'augmented reality', an emerging field in which real-world environments are supplemented by computer-generated data. In November 2014, he was commissioned to create a suite of hidden or virtual art works to celebrate the opening of Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery's new purpose-built premises. The works in this commission – collectively entitled *Cryptocosmos* – act as digital extensions of Te Uru and the surrounding Lopdell Precinct, with more recent additions moving further into Titirangi Village.

The works in *Cryptocosmos* are at first unseen and unheard. They are tagged to a specific image from a location by a free software application called Aurasma, and revealed only via a mobile device when a viewer is present in that space. Animated abstract forms appear as an overlay in the device's camera feed, mapping directly over architectural features. The animations operate in real-time, appearing to twist and turn in three dimensional space as the viewer moves their device.

The accompanying music might seem a little discordant; the unexpected sounds and silences command a more cerebral kind of attention than simple melodies. Gregory describes these as "angular, sparse fragments of piano music [which] match an arrangement of abstract lines and shapes"² This reinforces a synaesthetic reading of the work, in which both interlocking audio and visual components find associative parallels in the other.

1. Justin Gregory, "Cryptocosmos," Standing Room Only, Radio New Zealand National, August 9, 2015, Radio broadcast: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/nz-society/20150809>.

2. Ibid.



Inside Te Uru, the majority of architectural triggers Novak has employed for his interventions are metal way-finding signage, directing visitors to exhibition spaces and other areas. His stylised arrow forms could be read as resembling musical scores, and echo the thin lines of the way-finding's typeface. Here, Novak cites this unique building as his inspiration. In doing so, he also incorporates architecture more generally, and the art institution resident within, as his subjects. In his selection of visual triggers, both within and beyond the gallery, Novak takes a playful approach to the poetics and politics of social context: a sign indicating a CCTV camera or fire hydrant, the art deco tiled floor of Lopdell House's main foyer, a title card for another artist's work, the local hairdresser and village supermarket.

Novak's new media works speak to the links between the physical and the virtual, foregrounding the technological mediation of different sensory experiences, which is at the forefront of artistic possibility. At the same time, their formal qualities refer back to Modernist abstraction, such as painter Wassily Kandinsky, a key pioneer of synaesthetic art making. The hidden element of *Cryptocosmos* could be likened to the inaccessibility or subjectivity of a synaesthetic moment: much like the interior of Novak's mind, we cannot access the experience except through a translation manifested in another medium.

Emil McAvoy
October 2015

Published on the occasion of:
Shannon Novak: *Cryptocosmos*
From 1 November 2014
Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery,
Lopdell House & Titirangi Village, Auckland

